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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the writing of teaching cases by students to help them understand and use multiple theoretical frames for practical decision making. It describes a doctoral level course called "Theoretical Perspectives" and the doctoral program at Temple University's Department of Educational Leadership. Students are required to study the cases before class sessions and share their analyses and action plans during the class discussion. One of the students' term assignments is to write their own teaching case. A survey of students indicate that most viewed the case-study approach positively and reported that they learned to value the usefulness of theory in practical situations. (Contains 21 references.) (LMI)

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WRITING OF TEACHING CASES BY STUDENTS : INTEGRATING PRACTICE AND ADMINISTRATIVE THEORY

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Writing of Teaching Cases By Students: Integrating Practice and Administrative Theory

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Purpose and Theoretical Perspective

The case method of teaching educational administration dates back to the publication of Educational Administration : Cases and Comments (Sargent and Belisle, 1955), developed with support from the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE) due to influence from the Harvard Business School (HBS) where administrative case teaching was pioneered. While the case book by Culbertson, Jacobson, and Reller (1960) soon followed and HGSE continued using cases, interest by other institutions seemed to drop off. Unlike these older case books, three textbooks were published in 1988 (McPherson, Crowson, & Pitner; Haller & Strike; and Strike, Haller, & Solltis) which utilized cases to illustrate theoretical concepts in their expository text and also provided additional cases for student analysis. The two books by Haller and Strike use single issue cases that focus on ethical dilemmas. Cases are presented with more contextual background in the McPherson book, however, the analysis is often a critique of past actions rather than the development of an action plan. Case books followed in 1991 (Ashbaugh & Kasten and Kowalski) that were organized by leadership role, issue, or administrative function which provided classroom opportunities for simulated decision making around single focus problems. Kirschmann (1996) organized his brief case studies by administrative level. A catalogue of individual teaching cases, about half of which relate to school administration, is available from HGSE (1994). Hoy and Tarter's 1995 book is the most comprehensive organizational theory book to use a case teaching method approach. After describing an individual theory (some examples are Simon, Lindblom, Etizoni, Cohen & March, Vroom & Yetton), a brief case is given which is then

analyzed by the authors using that theory. The book ends with nine cases and guidelines for selecting the "best model" (theory) for analysis of a specific case.

The introductory educational administration text by Sergiovanni and others (1992) labels the major views of administrative theory as efficiency, person, political and decision-making, and culture. Bolman and Deal's concept of Reframing Organizations (1991) in which students are asked to deliberately look at an administrative case using different lenses or theoretical frames has the power to unblock students from fixating on their preferred frame of reference. This process of using multiple theoretical frames for the same case does not mean that all frames fit equally well, but seldom is only one frame the best fit. Bolman and Deal's frames are named structural, human resource, political, and symbolic which mirror Sergiovanni's terms. In addition to these four major views; critical theory with the aspects of class, economics, gender and power may be used as a fifth frame (Foster, 1986). In our Temple Educational Leadership doctoral course, Theoretical Perspectives, where students are expected to analyze cases using these five frames; few of the short, single issue cases are feasible.

The contextual factors so necessary for analysis of the political, symbolic, and critical frames require thick descriptions rather than outline sketches. Dan Lortie (1994) reminded us of the need for "complex cases" such as the situations faced in the real world and that students who write cases gain a better "sense of the whole." Still the best book on the writing of teaching cases is the 1969 classic by Towl with the definitive book on the case method of teaching having been written by Christensen (1987) both of HBS.

Problem Based Learning (PBL) as described by Bridges & Hallinger (1995) has features in common with the case method: problem-centered, emphasis on analysis and problem-solving skills. However, they note the case method is different in that the basic unit of instruction is the case and the discussions are teacher-led. Teacher as

discussion leader requires not only skill, but extensive preparation of each case to enable the instructor to have the class function as a learning group with students personally involved in the discussion. Christensen (1987) provides guidance as to the development of the teacher as facilitator and assistance to students in learning that their role is not that of passive observer, but active participant in the learning of the entire class community. The major difference between PBL and the case method is that PBL is the completion and implementation of a project to solve a defined problem by a student group while the case method involves the entire class around a specific case. PLB enables the student also to practice live-long learning, meeting-management, and job skills such as are often the focus of a field-based internship. The case method with its whole class focus provides common experiences for the class and helps students to become acquainted with the vocabulary, theory, and practices of a given field.

PLB projects have been created by students as course projects similarly to students writing cases as presented in this paper. While students have found PLB project development to take longer than anticipated, their reaction to the experience has been positive. A format or template is available (Bridges & Haller, 1995, pp. 20-49) and three faculty-developed projects have been published by ERIC for classroom use.

A case story telling/writing process described by Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski (1995) incorporated the Writing Process that had been previously used so effectively with K-12 students and teacher pre-service training. Key differences that they noted between cases and case stories are the simplicity and personal perspective of the case stories. The writing of cases for teaching by students combines the personal element as cases are built on real situations and the multiple perspectives that contribute to student growth as compared to the telling of "war stories."

This paper describes the writing of teaching cases by students as a contribution to their understanding and usage of multiple theoretical frames for practical decision making. While the example presented here involves one particular doctoral course, Theoretical Perspectives, the author also has used this method with the beginning educational administration and principalship courses for master's students.

Methods / Data Source

The course, Theoretical Perspectives, has been offered seven times by the author every fall for the entering doctoral cohort in educational administration since 1989. The course has been taught with a variety of partners over the years, but the format was designed by the author. Modifications of the course have been made each year based on written anonymous feedback from the present cohort with the most extensive changes made between Year 1 and Year 2. The first year was the only time that the course had three instructors and three written assignments. Dr. Laurence J. Parker (now at the University of Utah) taught the course with me the fall of 1990, 1991, and 1992. Dr. Novella Z. Keith has been the other team member for the fall of 1993, 1994, and 1995. Each year revisions have been made in the course after obtaining narratives written by students suggesting course revisions. This paper describes the course with major emphasis on the student writing of teaching cases.

Past students and graduates were surveyed for their reflections on this experience. Surveys were sent to 5 or 7 students from each of the 7 cohort years, with 39 of the 132 students selected for inclusion. Responses were received from 27 students, 69% of the group, with each cohort being represented by 2 or more replies. Responses were received both from students who did quite well in the course and those who found the course somewhat of a stretch. During the 7 year period of the cohort program, 11 respondents had graduated and 3 indicated that graduation was

anticipated for Spring 1996. The one page essay response instrument asked students to comment on 4 areas: writing of cases, analyses using theoretical frames, writing the action plan and selection of "best fit" frame, and case method of instruction.

The Doctoral Program

A total revision of our doctoral (Ed.D.) program resulted from the Temple University Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Study's (ELPS) participation in the Danforth Foundation's cycle beginning Spring 1988 for educational administration departments. Five departments were in this cycle (Arizona State, Auburn, Fordham, Miami-OH and Temple Universities and the University of Kansas) with each department selecting their own area for study. The foundation money allowed department members to hear prominent speakers with the other universities in the group and provided for the services of a facilitator as the department worked out changes in the program. For the first time since 1975 several new faculty members had been hired and their input was critical in the program revision.

The key feature of the Temple program is that a cohort group starts each September and together take 9 semester hours of courses both the fall and spring semesters. Students in the cohort looking to become administrators in K-12 public or private schools have included teachers with a few years of experience, principals, superintendents, and intermediate unit staff from urban, suburban and rural areas. Other doctoral students studying higher education administration have included nursing supervisors, physical therapists, hospital administrators, university admissions people, music and business school faculty. Nearly all our students are employed full time so this is a major commitment of time and energy. Even with verbal and written warnings from both faculty and former students as to this situation, about a month into the fall term, panic may set in. However, the provision for the cohort interaction allows

them to support each other. This interaction is particularly important as each cohort group generally has many ages of students from their late twenties to their mid fifties.

In addition to the organizational theory course and an action research course, the students begin a job-site internship and also attend seminars with speakers or topics of importance to the group during the fall semester. The internship and seminars continue in the Spring semester along with a course on Current Issues and another research course, Analytical Studies. All six courses were developed for the cohort program and were the result of intensive discussion among the faculty. Courses are scheduled for Monday and Wednesday evenings with seminars on some Saturdays and several week days during the cohort year. The internship was only added this year by reducing the number of seminar sessions.

After the cohort year, students complete their programs at their own rate. The cohort year creates a solidarity among the students that we as faculty had not really expected--students let us know what works and what doesn't ! This has been most beneficial as we make revisions in the program. We have found that the cohort experience provides student support for each other and that there are also cross-cohort groups that work together.

The rest of the program consists of a five course college core including two research courses, six courses for superintendency or higher education administration, and two advanced seminars plus the completion of a dissertation along with electives. The two research courses and the current issues course in the cohort year, the two research courses in the college common core, and the two advanced seminars all help the students to investigate, focus and refine a dissertation topic.

This course was designed to develop some "habits of mind" so that administrative actions would be based on reflection, analysis, and conscience. The tools are the five major theoretical frameworks and their accompanying theorists to expand the modes of thinking used by the participants. The case method requires students to analyze a problem within a specific context and develop a plan for administrative action.

Material from the course outline for Theoretical Perspectives: Educational Administration 775 is presented for the reader's information. First, is the introduction from the course outline followed by the course objectives.

Most practitioners (and some researchers) in education have an adverse reaction to "organizational theory". The typical reactions have been (organizational) "theory does not relate to my life", or "my work situation deals with real problems, not theory", or "theory does not relate to what schools are really like". The function of this theoretical perspectives course will be to make intellectual sense out of the society, organizations and administrative problems that we will study. To be sure, there is no empirically proven theory of school organization, but this course will provide you with various lenses (i.e., theories and critiques) with which to view educational organizations. Usage of these theoretical frameworks for administrative decision making will enable the practitioner to approach the solving of problems in a deliberate, conscious, thoughtful, and reflective manner. An overview of the development of thought in educational administration as well as critiques of these theoretical perspectives will be provided:

1. efficiency-structural
2. people-human resource
3. political-decision making
4. cultural-symbolic
5. critical theory

In addition to an understanding of organizational theory, each student will be expected to apply theoretical concepts to specific educational administrative cases.

Course Objectives

1. To acquire a basic knowledge of the five theoretical frameworks (efficiency, person, political/decision making, culture and critical) in organizational theory.

2. To understand the differences between the major writers in the field of organizational and leadership theory.

3. To be able to critique these theories and be aware of the assumptions underlying these theories.

4. To apply these theories and theoretical frameworks to specific situations so that leadership behavior is based on reflective thinking and the understanding of organizations.

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Students are given a packet of course materials which includes eight cases, other readings, and the course outline. Both this packet and the required textbooks (Foster, 1986, and Pugh & Hickson,1989), which they are to purchase, are available by late June, more than two months before the first course meeting.

A different case is used each class session for the first six meetings to provide practice using the structural, human resources, and political-decision making frameworks. Cases are analyzed using not only the general theoretical framework, but also the specific theorists within that frame. Students are to have studied the case and the readings pertaining to the various theories prior to class sessions. Students share their case analysis, theorist and theoretical frame selection, action plans, and rationales which are the most important part of the class case discussion. However, the action plan should be implementable. They challenge and question each other and in the process, their perspectives are widened, as is that of the teacher-facilitator.

A good teaching case (one with sufficient complexity and adequate contextual descriptions) will result in different discussions with different classes. It never ceases to amaze me that just when I become tired of a case, a different class leads me to a new view on that case. Students learn not just from the instructor, but from each other and each other's questions.

Students experience difficulty with the case method for two reasons: they are uncomfortable presenting their own analysis in front of their peers and they expect the instructors to give them the answers. As in real life, which the cases present a slice of, there is not one way to respond. This change from the usual regularities of university instruction in which students read the book, take lecture notes, and repeat this on the exam to a more fluid situation makes the students uncertain as to their status. They not only do not believe that there is not one right answer; but then believe that anything said is acceptable even if does not show thought, reflection, understanding of the

specific theorist cited, or clearly is a non workable solution. Additionally, they are most uncomfortable challenging their peers in class discussions..

During the cultural and critical theory module one new case is discussed and some of the cases are revisited to discover new aspects of the cases that did not come to light using the other frameworks. This portion of the class relies somewhat more on instructor lecture and class discussion of a set of readings as these two frames are generally not in the experience of the students. The most difficult framework for school administrators is the critical theory lens and yet, by the end of the course, students are valuing this frame for the way it opens their thinking.

In the final module three cases not previously used are presented to allow students to apply their learning to novel situations during classes and for the final exam. The only written assignment for the class is for the student to write their own teaching case, analyze their case using the five theoretical frames, and develop an action plan. Essentially on both their own case and the final exam, they are applying their learning in novel situations. Class case discussions have provided a model and opportunities for practice.

The following description of the written case study is provided in the course outline:

Written case study

Review "The Case Writing Process" in the case book. Develop a case such as those used in module 1. A case should be written so that the reader assumes the part of the administrator in the case. Enough information (which could include exhibits photo copied from school or district materials) must be included so that the reader can make a decision. All names of people, schools, districts, and locations should be disguised so that the reader will not be able to make an identification. Since this is a teaching (not a research) case, it is possible to augment or change an actual situation. All exhibits should be numbered and referred in the text by number. All pages must be numbered.

Part 1 includes all material needed for the administrative decision which ends the case. The cases read for class are only part 1 of the assignment.

Part 2 should include what actually happened and the consequences of that decision if a decision has already been made.

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Part 3 is the analysis. As a reflective practitioner, you will analyze the situation by applying each of the five frames to the problem to clarify the situation and generate options. For each frame you should select one specific theorist and use the concepts of that theorist for analysis. Your analysis of each frame should be more than just self-reflection, but should demonstrate how the elements of the particular theory selected for the frame relate to the specifics of the case situation. For the framework of critical theory, examine the case through the lens of the economic, social and cultural conditions (and the ideologies that support them) in this case. Using the Foster book and the assigned readings will be helpful for your analysis. Analysis of each frame would require at least one page of text.

Part 4 is the action plan. Using the characteristics of the situation, you are to present your argument for which frame seems tc provide the best fit. Include an administrative action plan for solving the problem. Consider both the immediate and long term actions needed and develop a plan which anticipates the possible road blocks to a workable solution.

Class size has ranged from a low of 15 to a high of 25 with a total of 134 students completing the Theoretical Perspectives course over the seven year period. They have produced a total of 43 cases written such that they might be used in class, not including those cases which could not be disguised in such a way to protect the identity of the districts, schools, and role players. In the earlier years fewer than 5 cases per class were usable. We have since defined the assignment more precisely, clarified the process during class case analysis sessions, and added the component of working with a coaching partner to provide feedback on the other's written case which has doubled the number of usable cases from each class. Even the writing of cases not ready for a class discussion, provide the writers with valuable insight into their understanding of administrative theory and the decision-making process.

While students are required to indicate their coaching partners, these efforts have not been monitored by the instructors. Some students have noted their self-selected coach has not been helpful. Others have suggested that since the case writing assignment is not due until session 13 in the 15 sessions, students do not start the writing early enough and that if the instructors set dates for the writing of each section of the assignment they would not wait until the last moment. Since the assignment is

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given to the students two months prior to the first class session, the instructors have resisted such monitoring of doctoral student behavior. We are considering making optional the submission of a draft by a certain date.

Student Reflections on Case Writing

With the exception of a few comments from some of the respondents; the reactions to this class, the writing assignment, and the case method were enthusiastically positive even though it was a difficult course with a heavy work load. A number of the respondents got out their cases and reread them or recounted detailed memories of the actual case which they wrote on the response sheet. There was a clear indication that learning is enhanced when associated with vivid (the cases used in class) and personal (the cases written by the students) stories. Following each subheading are actual comments from the respondents. The first number in parenthesis identifies the cohort, the second indicates which student.

Comments on Writing of the Case

> Lots of fun to re-read six years later! . . . Writing a case always provokes self reflection (1-1).
>
> found . . . in my file, it brought back memories. . . . It was an enjoyable experience! (1-2)
>
> As I wrote, the background of the situation became clearer, the complexities of each person as an individual and as a member of the group stood out, and the interplay of the dynamics sharpened (2-1)
>
> caused me to do a sequential & analytical task "analysis" of how the issue . . . had evolved.(2-2)
>
> (case involved self, saw thought different lens when writing than before. (3-2))
>
> gave me a clearer perspective as I was forced to examine specific details. (3-4)
>
> This truly brought home what it was that I had been "learning" all semester. (3-5)
>
> I enjoyed this assignment in particular. Communication theory embraces the concept that we learn through narrative. It is in the transaction with personal text and in a disciplined milieu (theory-bound)

that we actually reconcile our views and develop professional and self-knowledge. (3-6)

an opportunity to get feedback on complicated problems (3-7)

I enjoy writing. . . . It was fun. (4-1)

No problem writing the case, schools have abundance of problems (4-2)

"Finding" the case was the most difficult component . . . but I have to admit--it was fun! (4-3)

The interviews . . . gave me insight to the complexity of organizational interactions. (5-1)

This was an experience I grew from. (5-2)

Helped me to see the way in which certain perspectives influenced both the problem creating & solving process. (6-1)

I struggled with this assignment. . . . I had no experience as an administrator. (6-2)

found the writing very interesting . . . to apply a real-life situation to the theoretical frameworks . . . [but] difficult. . . . to make sure all necessary information . . . was included. Unfortunately, an extreme amount of writing was necessary for a project such as this. (6-3) [This was the only course writing assignment and papers averaged 25 pages in length.]

one of the more "pleasant" assignments and well "set up." I enjoyed writing . . . It gave me a better perspective on how it might have been handled differently.(7-1)

both difficult and challenging . . . forced me to be creative . . . imaginative . . . satisfaction out of the characters I created.(7-2)

I was glad that I selected a case very early in the semester and had written it down. (7-5)

Comments on Analyses Using Theoretical Frames

I think, having re-read my work, that the analysis using theoretical frameworks is the best way to understand theories. This task, though, does not benefit from having written the case. (1-1)

Using the frames forced me to see the mindscapes (2-1)

Being forced to analyze the situation from five perspectives taught me skills I have carried with me and used and in my current position.(2-2)

It was a stretch. (3-2)

I wasn't able to clearly delineate frame from frame at the time. . . . I now see that there is some overlap in the theories. (3-4)

it was at this point that everything came together for me. (3-5)

I distinctly recall using frames rather than theorists but then citing theorists/theories to more accurately illustrate the paradigm. (3-6)

Great exercise, because it requires building flexibility in points of view. (3-7)

As an intellectual exercise, the use of theoretical frames is a thought provoking and illuminating process.(4-1)

I was forced to match the theory to the reality and consider the options the theory offered . . . forced reflective thinking. (4-4)

helped . . . to conceptualize each frame . . . see as a whole . . . to understand the strengths and weaknesses of each frame. (5-1)

I did not truly accept the relevance of theoretical frames until I tried to apply them to the case . . . offered insight into the need for self evaluation in all phases of life. (5-2)

This activity was helpful in making the theoretical frames real. Too often coursework does not connect theory with practicality.(6-2)

very valuable part of the paper because it forced me to tie together all of the theorists and to particularly wrestle with the "critical" frame.(7-1)

essence of the course . . . taught me . . . there is more than one way--or lens--of looking at a problem. (7-2)

Good synthesis of material. (7-3)

The analyses were very difficult to write, but in the process, I had to dig into a particular author sufficiently that I came to understand the frame, and especially the author, quite well. (7-5)

Comments on Writing the Action Plan and Selection of "Best Fit" Frame

I've found that a major limit[ation] of most organization theories is that they too often reduce complex human interactions to a least common denominator. . . . Still, a [good] working theory is possibly the best place to start to solve a problem or to cause change. (1-1)

allowed me to move from the level of constructs to "real world" application.(1-2)

no difficulty in writing . . . [as] very clear to me from the beginning. (3-2)

a way to finally understand those frames. (3-4)

took the writing . . . to a deeper level . . . not simply "match up" my case and individual frames . . . had to delve deeper to resolve the situation [and] defend my choice. (3-5)

most interesting . . . and perhaps the most difficult. It forced me to gather the major ideas . . . in the case and resolve the conflicts inherent in them.(4-1)

Allowed me to see how theory translates into practice.(4-3)

took that data generated by the analyses and forced theory into practice.(4-4)

the point where theory met practice . . . the need to determine the dominate frame and use it to its best advantage--seemed an over simplification. (5-1)

This was an important activity in that it allowed "closure". . . . The practical application must also be defended which causes one to

evaluate ethical and moral stances. (5-2)

let administrators know that theory can inform their practice.(6-1)

most challenging part [of the writing assignment] For the first time in my teaching career, I had to think like an administrator. (6-2)

This was very revealing--because I could see, for the first time, a variety of "fits." (7-1)

Comments on the Case Method of Instruction

This is the way to do it. In addition, writing the case--the act of creating a story in written from--was good preparation for the dissertation I was to write later. (1-1)

I recall the most animated discussion in class when we used case studies. I have used the case method in my own [college] teaching. Placing oneself in the case provides the opportunity to rethink one's beliefs and actions, to integrate theory and practice. (1-2)

As I look back, I see this class was critical for the residency and immersion into being a reflective educational administration practitioner. (2-1)

It's fabulous--a true integration of theory & practice ! Going from a classroom to an administrative position . . . would have been so much more difficult had I not had the benefit of a course such as 775. (2-2)

An excellent way to "learn in context !" (3-1)

A valuable experience ! Interesting ! (3-2)

Good "how to" way to approach the topic . . . emphasized the concept of looking at all possible approaches or solution to a given situation. (3-3)

practical, yet causes the student to think on a broader base.(3-4)

I wish that I could take this course again with the academic background I have now. (3-5)

There's something frustrating about not having a "right answer" for each case--but life is like that ! (3-7)

valuable because it gives graduate students the opportunity to deal with real life. (4-1)

Great way to teach ! (4-2)

This course and the case writing assignment was one of the most challenging of the program. In retrospect, it is the only method that could result in such mastery of the theory . . . I am now considering the case method as a mode of instruction for the freshman seminar course I am developing. (4-3)

forces the student to develop the skills necessary to identify, dissect, analyze, and consider a range of solutions to problems . . . a very effective way to teach. (4-4)

allowed for a nexus between theory and practice. (5-1)

I feel an important part was the dialogue between students. (5-2)

> extremely valuable . . . appears to be he best way of achieving the goal of integrating practice and administrative theory. (6-1)
>
> This course comes too early in the doctoral program but it: 1. provides basis for good discussion, 2. makes theory real and practical, and 3. learning becomes active. (6-2)
>
> a very valuable teaching strategy because it closes the gap between theory and practice. (7-1)
>
> I liked it. Theoretical Perspectives was my first experience with the methodology. I felt that I was apart of the action, not a disinterested third party. I like the fact that I had a part in looking for solution, rather than being apprised of the solutions, as is the case in studying under more conventional methods. It was exciting. It made me think. It also allowed me to identify with the case's protagonist--something one rarely does while studying in a more conventional method. (7-2)

Discussion

Even with a very heavy reading and preparation load, students comments on the writing of teaching cases has been most positive. Most rewarding to this instructor has been to hear students of this course explain critical theory to students in other courses. Additionally, students given an instrument to determine their preferred leadership frame on the first night invariably rated themselves as either structural or human resource leaders, but became advocates for other frames during the semester. Students reported that theory actually was useful in practice, a belief they did not have at the beginning of the semester.

Educational Importance

Teaching educational administration using the case method is not for all instructors as it does shift power from the teacher to the students. However, the writing of teaching cases expands student horizons in both a personal and theoretical way. This paper was written to provide information on another educational leadership teaching strategy.

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